



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

### FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Megan Durham 202-208-5650

### FEDERAL AGENCIES AGREE TO IMPROVE COOPERATION ON ENDANGERED SPECIES

#### New Agreement Will Help Prevent Conflicts, Conserve Species

Fourteen Federal agencies have signed a formal agreement to improve their implementation of the Endangered Species Act toward conservation and economic objectives, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt announced today.

Babbitt said the memorandum of understanding signed by the Federal agencies will help avoid endangered species conflicts and increase the effectiveness of Federal recovery actions for endangered species.

"This agreement is a major step forward in our efforts to make the Endangered Species Act work better," Babbitt said. "The sad truth is that, under previous Administrations, many endangered species conflicts that wound up in court were caused by a lack of interagency coordination. Under this memorandum of understanding, these agencies will now sit down at the same table to coordinate their planning efforts, pre-empting potential endangered species problems. This will help get decisions about Federal programs and endangered species out of the courts and back into the hands of the Congress and the Administrative branch.

"The agreement also involves the Federal agencies in the conservation and recovery of endangered species. By doing a better job of bringing back species on Federal lands, this initiative will also help relieve the need for conservation on private lands."

The Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service provides oversight for threatened and endangered marine resources. Commerce Secretary Ronald H. Brown said, "This agreement will help Federal agencies meet all of the President's economic and environmental goals, and will ensure the best communication possible and the most effective use of Federal resources."

"This is another step in the right direction for Endangered Species Act implementation," said Don Christiansen, chair of the Western Urban Water Coalition and general manager of the Central Utah Project. "By formally committing to work better among themselves and setting specific goals, Federal agencies with Endangered Species Act responsibilities can make the act more a planning and management tool and less simply an enforcement weapon. Water supply managers will appreciate the change." The Western Urban Water Coalition is an association of the water utilities for the largest western cities, serving over 30 million water consumers.

The MOU was signed September 28, 1994, by the Agriculture Department's Forest Service; the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Mines, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service (NPS), and Minerals Management Service; the Department of Defense; the Army Corps of Engineers; the Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service; the Transportation Department's U.S. Coast Guard, Federal Aviation Administration, and Federal Highway Administration; and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The MOU establishes regional interagency working groups that will coordinate agency actions to avoid conflicts over endangered species and create opportunities for conserving and recovering species that are listed or proposed for listing as endangered or threatened. The regional working groups will involve the public, states, Indian Tribal governments, and local governments as appropriate.

Federal agencies also will help the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service form endangered species recovery teams and implement recovery plans, conservation agreements, and other conservation actions developed by the regional interagency groups.

To the extent possible, the groups will also help protect declining species that are candidates for possible listing. In addition to improved Federal cooperation under this MOU, the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service are continuing to work with states toward conservation and recovery of endangered species under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act. The Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, BLM, and National Park Service earlier this year signed an agreement with the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to take appropriate conservation actions for species that have been identified as "candidates" for listing, thus potentially avoiding the need to list these species.

Federal activities can have a major impact on endangered and threatened species. Federal lands provide habitat for many of the 905 U.S. plant and animal species listed as endangered or threatened. Many Federal agencies also have significant expertise that can be helpful in designing and carrying out recovery programs for endangered species.

The MOU will strengthen efforts already begun by Federal agencies to coordinate their activities. For example, the Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and state agencies are coordinating management in areas of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah inhabited by the desert tortoise. Pacific salmon habitat is protected through a joint conservation initiative called PACFISH. The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management now consult with the National Marine Fisheries Service while preparing long-term strategies to restore important aquatic habitat on federal lands in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and northern California.

"Today's memorandum of understanding, coupled with earlier joint policy agreements, will streamline agency cooperation and improve implementation of the Endangered Species Act," said Nancy Foster, assistant director of the National Marine Fisheries Service. "Under PACFISH, for example, we've worked effectively with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to strengthen protection for listed Snake River salmon by ensuring that habitat protection and restoration be included in the conservation strategy."

USDA Forest Service Associate Chief Dave Unger said, "To get ahead of the listing process and the expense listing a species brings, we need to emphasize proactive management to avoid the need to list. That is why the Forest Service has invested in its sensitive species program, which aims at conserving species before they decline so far that they need listing, and initiated the agreement to improve conservation of candidate species signed by five Federal agencies last January."

Sherri Goodman, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, said, "The Department of Defense oversees an incredible variety and richness of natural and cultural resources on its military lands. Threatened and endangered species and their habitats are integral parts of our national heritage. Protecting these resources for future generations is an important part of our national defense mission."

Mollie Beattie, director of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is responsible for administering the Endangered Species program, said, "Our experience has shown that early

consultation with other agencies is the key to avoiding expensive and prolonged controversies over the impacts of Federal activities on endangered species. Perhaps if Federal agencies had gotten together in this way 15 years ago, we might have been able to avoid the painful conflict between timber harvesting in the Northwest and the conservation of the spotted owl."

BLM director Michael Dombeck said, "This approach offers exciting opportunities for recovering species and saving millions of taxpayer dollars. BLM is already working with the Forest Service, local communities, and other groups to anticipate and adjust to changes through partnerships such as the Trout Creek and Marys River restoration projects in Oregon and Nevada. The efforts of these communities are bringing back imperiled species such as the Lahontan cutthroat trout. By working together, we can maintain and restore healthy ecosystems without lawsuits, without rhetoric, and without social and economic disruptions."

"National Park Service policies are designed to implement the Endangered Species Act within an ecosystem framework," said NPS director Roger Kennedy. "To do this successfully, we are working with other Federal agencies whose lands are also integral parts of these ecosystems."